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ABSTRACT

The innovation of an instructional program utilizing "The New York Times" to teach reading skills to an ethnically and educationally diverse group of sixth graders resulted in an overwhelmingly positive response from students. The wide range of subject matter in "The Times" had something for every student, regardless of interests or reading ability. Peer interaction and a variety of activities were stimulated: vocabulary exercises, mock stock-market exchanges, identification of famous people, book selection for the school library, and so on. (KS)

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Topic: An Innovative,
District-Developed
Reading Program for
an Integrated Population
and its System of
Management

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One of the basic concepts in the educational philosophy of Greenburgh Central School District Number 7 is that we find strength in our diversity. The multi-ethnicity of our student population, along with their varied performance levels and wide economic spread, challenges our abilities to effectively teach all kinds of children.

We do not bemoan the fact that our children cannot fit into the same mold. We know that they learn a great deal from each other. Thus we try to provide opportunities for them to derive maximum benefits from their interpersonal and intercultural exchanges.

Similarly, our district philosophy supports the variance of teacher styles within a framework of accountability. Teachers are encouraged to develop strategies based on their individual strengths. Our chairperson made specific reference to the eclectic programs in our district which support professional individualism. It was in this spirit that I began, several years ago, to experiment with the daily newspaper as a curriculum resource.

Initially, I was impressed by the fresh supply of topics and words which were available to students everyday. Further, I realized that unlike textbooks, whose contents are necessarily finite, newspapers, when regularly used, are sequential, updated and openended.

A favorite greeting among students in our school is, "Hey, what's happening?". Students want to know what is going on now. The newspaper helps us to capitalize on this high interest factor. Students can relate to their own experiences while they explore beyond the confines of their immediate environments. Things are "happening" to people all over the world. The newspaper brings it to the students' doorstep.

Too many Americans are content to get all of their news information from radio and television. Using the newspaper in the classroom provides an opportunity to counteract this trend. Reading and its related skills are essential keys to opening up the vast storehouse of knowledge housed within the pages of the newspaper. If students want to know about it, they will have to read about it.

At first, I ordered a few newspapers from various publishers and developed lessons in reading, mathematics and social studies. The students responses were overwhelmingly positive. Finally, I selected The New York Times as the prime newspaper resource in the classroom. I cut down on textbook orders so that each child could receive his own copy of the paper each day. I retained textbooks as supplementary resources for reference and skills reinforcement. I selected The New York Times because of its high quality standards for written work and reporting and for the wide range of subjects presented within its voluminous pages. There is something there for everyone.

The fact that our district's classes are heterogeneously grouped was an exciting challenge in using The Times in a sixth grade class. I have students who read on a ninth and tenth grade level. (The reading level of The Times is 9.5) But I knew that even though the students could read the words, they could not fully digest the content with experiential enrichment. On the other hand, I have students who read on third and fourth grade levels. What was in it for them?

I evaluated my policies and reaffirmed my beliefs that students benefit from peer interaction and their self image is enhanced when they can contribute and learn in an unrestricted and unthreatening atmosphere. I determined to

allow my students to operate in a setting which supported independence, trust and freedom to share. Assignments are corrected but not graded. Working space is not specifically assigned, but is selected based on its appropriateness to the assignment. Working partners are chosen based on mutual interest. The results are gratifying. A proficient reader and a reluctant reader may share an ardent interest in certain sports. It is not uncommon to see two boys in my classroom mulling over the sports pages for basketball results or players' averages, or to see three girls reading about ceremonial costumes in Java.

The New York Times is considerably larger than a textbook. Space is needed to spread out. Students feel free to find a corner on the floor or to go out into the halls to work. Ground rules have been set, but more importantly, students are too involved in what they are doing to be mischievous or disruptive.

If the assignment dictates that they work independently, they do so. One girl in my class is interested in antiques. Since none of the students share her fervor for the subject, she pursues it individually. No one covers his papers or withholds information. The world of knowledge is available to the entire class.

Sharing academic experiences with wide-ranged ability levels presents opportunities for some students to take advantage of the in-depth coverage of news articles. They thrive on a level of specificity which includes historical background and current details. Other students, who are still developing as readers, can acquire the gist of the article by reading the headline and first two paragraphs. (Newspaper articles are specifically designed to present the climax first.) Consequently, both sets of students can experience success on their own terms.

Opportunities for growth through the use of the newspaper medium are limited only by one's imagination.

In my classroom we have provided lots and lots of large lined chart paper so that written work and pictures can be shared. Knowing that they are not to be "graded," students are not threatened by corrections in spelling or grammar. Often they correct themselves or each other. They are presented with the opportunity to openly respond to questions which have been placed on the classroom boards or in the corridors. Some of the questions and/or pictures are their own. In this setting, they are free to frankly express their opinions.

Often, students from other classes will respond to the questions like "Do You Believe in the Loch Ness Monster?". Most often, we find that the responses from the children in my class are more sophisticated, because they have previously read and shared information on the subject. This process of reading and sharing can take many forms. The class may decide to read together (which was the case in the recent article about The Loch Ness Monster), because the subject was universally appealing to them.

Students may or may not elect to read aloud. Most often they do, because a successful program promotes uninhibited participation. Often the child will scan ahead to find a paragraph with which he feels he can be reasonably successful. Since every student has to be helped with some words, students do not feel inadequate if they need assistance. Often, the whole class, teacher included, has to refer to the dictionary for the proper pronunciation or the meaning of an unusual word.

The teacher must allow for ample discussion time after these experiences. Further, the teacher must have skilled questioning techniques which promote literal, interpretive and creative responses from the class. Moreover, there are unlimited opportunities for increasing vocabulary, pinpointing the main idea, developing comprehension and encouraging critical analysis. At this point, written assignments can be appropriately designed for these skills.

Magic markers, scissors and glue are also essential commodities in effecting the program. Old newspapers are cut up to provide shopping experiences for math, or to save words for parts of speech, contractions or compounds. The concepts are standard but each child's contributions are unique, based on his abilities and interests. One student finds ten palindromes (words like "radar," which spell the same backwards or forwards). Another student finds one. The entire class shares both finds and has thoroughly enjoyed the hunt.

Every child in my sixth grade class can interpret figures in the stock exchange section. A father, who happened to be a Wall Street broker, was invited to explain the mechanisms of the exchange to the class. He worked with me to be certain that he began on the simplest level and moved to the more complex. Remember, there is something in it for everyone. He was quite effective. After he left, the class drew up contracts and purchased imaginary stock certificates. Each child made careful decisions about the stocks in which they would invest, often discussing their prospects with parents and other adults. Toy manufacturers and hamburger restaurants were high favorites. Every Tuesday the class "checks up" on the progress (or lack of it) of their stocks. One need only to read faces to tell whether McDonald's went up or down that week. Careful records are kept and dividends are computed.

The Times further provides opportunities for vicarious experiences in areas which may not be immediately accessible to students. They can take imaginary trips to distant places via airlines advertisements. Another boon to geography is for students to locate the places on the date lines of news articles. One of my students developed a graph which plotted this data over a three day period and located the origin of news articles in The New York Times in terms of cities, states or countries on the seven continents.

When students use the newspaper on a daily basis they begin to stockpile relevant information. They are familiar with the names and positions of world notables and can identify heads of state, sports stars, entertainers, politicians and world reknown scientists. One of our class assignments involved the children making "Composites of Famous People". Students effectively combined Howard Cosell's head with Billy Jean King's body for some hilarious results. The academic task, however, was to correctly spell, punctuate and include capital letters in the use of proper nouns.

The implications for the effective use of the newspaper in the classroom are enumerable. Teachers and classes can function in an integrated, activity-oriented program which encourages originality, curiosity and resourcefulness. As teachers and students become increasingly involved, they develop strategies to suit individual teaching and learning styles.

Professional collaboration is enhanced as the ~~class~~ may consult with the physical education teacher to learn the rules and procedures of a game like cricket about which they have read in the paper. Or, they may ask the music teacher to find tapes, records, musical instruments or sheet music so that they can learn songs from exotic places which were featured in the paper. The art

teacher may be asked to further explain the style of a painter or sculptor whose works were illustrated in the Arts and Leisure Section of The Sunday Times. Trips to art museums could follow.

The librarian is, of course, intricately involved in this process. My students are constantly requesting the use of almanacs, atlases, dictionaries, tape recorders, filmstrips, books and projectors to support the extended research which emanates from their daily experiences with The Times. These busy and involved children are a librarian's dream.

Recently, when the Children's Book Review appeared in The New York Times, announcing the books, publishers, authors and illustrators who had been recognized for their outstanding contributions, the children reviewed the list and requested that the librarian purchase those books. She did! Those books were most popular at the circulation desk. The class enjoyed a sense of positive contribution.

Finally, the reading consultant plays an important role in supporting children's efforts to read the newspaper. She helps them with words which they have cut out of the paper. They devise games to make complete sentences or to punctuate properly. Sometimes remedial reading students ask her to help them with an article which they want to read in its entirety. Often she helps students with the written assignments which have followed a reading experience.

Teachers in my district are currently involved in a teacher institute course which meets with me on Tuesdays. During these sessions I am able to help teachers to develop an awareness of the opportunities for academic enrichment through use of the daily newspaper. They learn how to plan ahead, improvise and evaluate classroom experiences. Most important, they learn that herein

lies an opportunity for teachers and students to co-exist in an uninhibited and fruitful atmosphere.

If this program were featured in the advertisements of the paper, the caption would have to read: FOR SALE - THE JOY OF LEARNING. THERE IS SOMETHING IN IT FOR EVERYONE!